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HEADLINE: UM turns 150 with eyes on rank, research

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BODY:

COLLEGE PARK -- Charles Benedict Calvert's 19th-century view from the upper floors of his family's 2,000-acre Riversdale plantation took in rolling pastures, woods, and perhaps ox carts and hay wagons plodding toward the narrow, dirt road called the Baltimore-Washington Turnpike.

His mind's eye saw other possibilities.

This descendant of the fifth Lord Baltimore envisioned the American farmer groomed as soil scientist, the country building schools that would, as he put it, "elevate the agricultural profession, and prevent the ambitious and high-minded sons of agriculturalists from abandoning the homes of their fathers, to seek distinction in other professions."

Within months of that speech before the Frederick County Agricultural Society in 1855, the General Assembly chartered the school that is now the University of Maryland, College Park. The college that struggled to get off the ground turns 150 years old today and by some measures is as strong as it has ever been.

The campus today celebrates Charter Day, the anniversary of the legislature's approval of the school charter. An actor portraying Calvert will be among those at the student union for the ceremonial cutting of a two-tiered cake iced with the school seal, and serving of 2,500 cupcakes. That's one cupcake for every 10 of the 25,000 undergraduates who attend College Park, along with nearly 10,000 graduate students.

Today's ceremony is part of months of anniversary events including an exhibition on and around campus of 50 decorated figures of Testudo, the school's terrapin mascot, a Maryland Public Television showing of a College Park history documentary, and a Maryland Day celebration April 29 featuring a 384-square-foot strawberry shortcake.

Today's cake is considerably more modest, to be sliced by university President C.D. "Dan" Mote Jr. Mote, who

took office in 1998, has been running with the baton passed by his predecessor, William E. Kirwan, in claiming the school's place among the country's best public universities. Mote says he considers this a mandate from the legislature, which in 1988 wrote into law College Park's position as a "flagship" school.

In remarks to the General Assembly last month, Mote said that as important as the school is to the state now, it will be more valuable still in 2011 "when it achieves a Top 10 ranking."

Not if, but when.

Mote acknowledges that college rankings are "all very fuzzy, of course," given the array of ratings in sundry categories available. Still, the school boasts of its climb up the ladder constructed by U.S. News & World Report, the most prominent among national standings.

In rankings published last summer, U.S. News placed College Park 18th among 162 public universities. When the magazine first created a specific ranking of public institutions in 1998, the school ranked 30th.

Rising further, says Mote, means recruiting the best students and faculty. That means continuing to improve programs, which means, in part, more money. If the school wants to be counted among the five public universities designated by the state as "peers" - all of which were rated in the top 11 by U.S. News last year - it's going to have to spend \$120 million more a year, Mote says.

Running the school now costs \$1.2 billion a year - a combination of tuition, state allocation, research grants, fund raising, athletics and fees. Undergraduates from Maryland pay more than \$17,000 a year for tuition, room, board and fees. Out-of-state students, who make up 25 percent of undergraduates, pay nearly \$30,000. Tuition has risen about 35 percent since 2002.

"I think the only thing holding us back is resources," says Mote. "I think our direction is extremely solid - it's very entrepreneurial; it's very creative."

Since the late 1990s, College Park has been trying to expand learning outside the classroom. In one case, that has meant setting up separate dormitories so students can work together with faculty guidance on entrepreneurial projects.

In another program, students work together on one public interest problem - nuclear waste disposal was one example - for their four years on campus, finishing the project by presenting a report to a professional or industry group.

Mote says he would like to see every undergraduate given chances to study or work overseas, and to expand the already broad array of internships available at laboratories, businesses and government agencies in the area.

The school is taking the anniversary as a moment to blow its own horn about its research and its contributions to the Maryland economy.

Research grants have jumped from \$102 million a year in 1990 to \$350 million now - "a very respectable number," says Nils Hasselmo, president of the Association of American Universities.

The AAU includes 60 schools in the U.S. and two in Canada that are considered strong in research. College Park has been a member since 1969.

In its success competing for research money - 40 percent of which comes from the Department of Defense, the National Science Foundation and NASA - College Park stands about in the middle of AAU members, Hasselmo says. "They're very strong in astronomy and space science, for example," he says.

Just as technological change drives economic growth, universities drive business - either indirectly through research or more directly by providing startup support for technology companies. College Park does both.

Aris Melissaratos, Maryland's secretary of business and economic development, says it's hard to put a dollar figure on College Park's significance to the state economy but says, "there's no question it is the foundation of our knowledge economy. ... We're pushing all the 'next big things,' and it all comes out of the university."

That would apply even if the next big thing were really small, as in nanotechnology. Small Times Magazine, which covers this field, last summer rated the Maryland Center for Integrated Nano Science and Engineering at College Park best in the country in research and education in the emerging exploration of micro-space and structures.

That recognition came within weeks of news about the Deep Impact project, in which College Park scientists worked with NASA, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory and the Bell Aerospace and Technologies Corp. to slam a spacecraft into the comet Tempel 1 some 83 million miles from Earth. The hope is that comet dust collected on the mission will provide clues about how the solar system took shape.

Imagine: Charles Benedict Calvert, a slave-holding plantation owner, mostly wanted to grow better crops.

He was hardly alone in his day in those concerns. The year before Calvert's Frederick County Agricultural Society speech, Pennsylvania established the country's first such agricultural school, which later became Pennsylvania State University, and Michigan established what would become Michigan State University, according to George H. Callcott's *The University of Maryland at College Park, A History*.

Concern about the state of farming was building across the country as farmland became scarce in the eastern U.S., including Maryland. This support for agricultural education contributed to passage of the federal land grant act of 1862, which eventually created or supported 105 colleges around the country, including the school that became the University of Maryland, College Park.

By Callcott's account, the project did not get off to a roaring start.

After opening in October 1859 with 34 students - mostly the sons of trustees or other "prominent planter families," Callcott wrote - the school declined during the Civil War, staying open as a prep school in 1864, then closing for a year in 1866. By Callcott's account, the school did not hit its stride until the start of the 20th century, as crop prices rose and farmers gained a stronger political voice in the administrations of both Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. Land-grant college research helped double Maryland's farm production from 1890 to 1920, Callcott wrote.

The original mission carries on in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, with about 1,200 students, but the university's profile has been transformed.

"When I came, it was the institution of last resort" for local high school seniors, says Provost William W. Destler, who arrived in College Park as a postdoctoral student in electrical engineering 33 years ago. "Now it's the university of choice for half of the valedictorians and salutatorians in Maryland high schools."

Weeks after the cornerstone was laid for the school's first building in 1858, Charles Benedict Calvert - who had donated a north section of his family estate to the project - wrote to a prospective donor, describing the range of subjects that would be taught, saying, "We desire to have an Institution superior to any other."

Mote says the push to support an agricultural economy in the 19th century is not so different from supporting a knowledge economy today. Calvert, he says, "had the right idea. ... He was a very forward-thinking and technologically oriented guy."

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GRAPHIC: Photo(s)

1. The College Park campus has expanded greatly in the 150 years since its charter approval March 6, 1856. 2.

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Land-grant college research helped double Maryland's farm production from 1890 to 1920.

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